

An Interview with Poet, Miriam Barr at the Logos Café, 265, Ponsonby Road



Miriam, tell me about your background. Where were you born and brought up?

I was brought up in Kaitiaki, lived in the sticks with generators for power and solar panels, orchards and all that kind of stuff until I was 6, then moved round a number of rural locations till I was 13 and moved out to 90 Mile beach where I stayed until I came to Auckland when I was 17.

Do you come from a literary family?

Not really, although I have found poems that my father wrote to my mother. I would call it more of an imaginative family, lots of make-believe games, stories, creativity and stuff like that.

When did you begin to get influenced by poetry? What were the influences?

I started writing poems when I was 9 years old. We started learning about poetry in form 1 and this is when I really started getting into it. I was very imaginative as a child and this was a significant influence. I soaked up whatever I could of other poetry, but it was a bit sparse on the ground up north. I pick up on things that I see/hear and this sometimes develops into a poem.

In your view does the average person appreciate and value poetry?

Yes I think they can, it depends on whether the poetry they've heard applies to them otherwise it can seem too high-brow and distant sometimes.

Do you find performance-based poetry more popular than the written form?

Yes, in some ways it is. It's very special hearing a poet perform their own poems, although some poetry is better appreciated in its written form. It rather depends on what it is.

What sort of poetry did you begin writing - what were its main themes?

Poems about the sea and forest, the natural world mainly, there were some weird rhyming limericks and stuff like that, later a lot of venting poetry. Not particularly good but it started me off.

To what extent do your 'roots' influence what you are writing now?

Oh, completely. They were very influential in shaping what I think is important, what I notice of the world around me, and subsequently what I write about, what kind of imagery I use, all of that.

How does the way you make a living influence your poetry?

Slow Mo' Day—by Miriam Barr

A thousand apologies,

I hold no ill intent

and do not mean to be rude, but today looks like it'll be a slow motion day and can only be spent in a slow motion way.

I will move as if the air is too thick,

My mind will wander,

And I'll trip over my own feet,

spill my coffee,

light the filter end of my cigarette

and miss my mouth when I'm drinking

I will decide to do things

but procrastinate moving,

I will take a long time to make a point,

forget my point before I get there—

and—pause too often when I speak.

I will watch bad daytime T.V

and breathe like I'm sleeping

I will get lost in everything you say,

and be distracted easily

and most probably annoy you.

All Of my. Reactions. Will be—

—Delayed

So I beg your pardon, in advance

for falling so far behind you

but it looks like I'll be in slow motion today,

and it is only fair to give you full warning

I should be back at full speed tomorrow.

It might be better to check back then

when I've an attention span to offer

and have become accustomed to gravity again.

I work with people in mental health so yes a lot of my material comes from there

Can you describe your most effective working method? Do you wait for inspiration, or sit down every day with the intention of writing?

No, I don't write every day. Normally it's late at night when things are quiet and everyone else is asleep. I have to have a starting point, for instance like a picture that I've seen and then build the poem around it. Something that I feel is worth saying. Sometimes I sit down with the intention, but usually there is a piece of inspiration first.

How do you decide that a poem is finished?

Yes, sometimes I'm not finished for ages. I write until I'm done at that point and then come back and write some more. Actually I often re-write my endings. Sometimes just hearing it out loud decides whether it's finished. It's an intuitive thing.

Who do you write for? - Do you have a particular audience or person in mind?

I write for myself and for anyone who wants to read it. I write to express things that are important to me, that I think need to be said. It changes depending on the piece. But it generally is aimed to appeal to people who want something with some emotional substance, some realism, inspiration maybe, something that will jolt them out of everyday existence. Poetry seems to be such a big part of me, I mean I even think in poems some of the time, so it is hard to decipher exactly who it is for. I think I'd write it even if no one saw it.

Which of contemporary poets do you find most interesting?

Sylvia Plath— who is credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry - and Adrienne Rich, as well as Bukowski - I like that he writes about the ugly details. William Carlos Williams is another big influence, especially on my more recent pieces. I like his sparse realism. I really like a lot of the open mic poets at Poetry Live such as Ed Tate, Michael Steven, Murray Lee, Shane Hollands, Renee Liang, there's loads of really wicked voices coming through.

What are you working on at the moment?

My new book, it's called "Observations from the Poetry Factory" and it kind of explores how, to me, everything is poetry. There's a lot more attention to the structure and form than in my previous book though that same intense emotional quality hopefully still shows through. I'm hoping to have it out in December along with another short CD of music and poetry. Daniel Trotter will be doing art work for it, so it'll be another multimedia collection like 'Tangents' (available from Women's Bookshop and Unity Books).



Remembering Sweetness

You stepped off a scrap of paper
 dripping beaded summer days
 and memories of a breeze when
 hair was prep with soft
 hair pushed into warm sand
 and crashing waves mixed
 with your acoustic musings
 to form a soundtrack for that
 split-second moon
 we spent naive to heartbreak

—Miriam Bort